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Title Analysis: “Wish You Were Here”

In Robert Phillips’ poem “Wish You Were Here,” the narrator describes the miserable time he is having on a trip away from home. The word “wish” usually means to have a desire for something unattainable. “You” is noted to mean the one being addressed, and “were” is the past participle of the verb “to be.” Finally, the word “here” means at this particular place. When all those words are put together, the phrase “Wish you were here” brings elements of pleasure and togetherness to the title of the poem. This phrase usually calls to mind an image of a postcard from some exotic locale, with this cheery statement written on the front. “Wish you were here” implies that the speaker desires a close friend, family member, or significant other to be at the same exciting place as the speaker. Usually, when a speaker uses this phrase, he misses the other person, and wishes she could take part in all the fun he is having on vacation. The title “Wish You Were Here” is ironic in Phillips’ poem because of the emphasis the narrator puts on the dismal and redundant events of his trip.

Firstly, the poem uses the word “rain” twice: once in the first stanza and again in the second (2-6). Scientifically, “rain” is water falling drops condensed from vapor in the atmosphere. The word “rain” can have connotations of gloom and dreariness. Particularly if one is on vacation, rain would not be a favorable weather condition. In the case of the speaker of “Wish You Were Here,” the rain has continued for six days (2), and brought an influx of tourists to the crowded movie theatre (6). Especially on a scheduled vacation, as in the poem, rain would ruin numerous fun outdoor activities. A rainy vacation is a time that few people would want to share with a loved one, and so Phillips’ use of rain provides proof of the title’s ironic message. In fact, most people would not want to accompany another on a trip if the weather was poor, or ask another to go with them. Usually, a person would not ask a loved one to go on a rainy trip in order to spare them the gloom and boredom that is associated with rainy weather. Because the narrator wishes the other person was with them, it shows that he does want her to experience the monotony and dreariness he is experiencing.

Along with the monotonous rain the speaker experiences; he also describes his reluctance to “undertake” “unnecessary” and redundant tasks (9). The definition of “undertake” is to take upon oneself, and “unnecessary” means not absolutely needed. In “undertaking the unnecessary,” the narrator is involving himself in an unrewarding task. He is merely occupying his time with mundane activities, and receives no benefit from this waste of time. The narrator provides the examples of shaving for the second time in a row (9), and “sorting hardware” that does not belong to him (10), perhaps suggesting that he holds a regular job as a clerk or stockperson. He would rather do something meaningful or important with his time, but it seems as though he lacks the motivation. Also, he is on a trip, and so he should be participating in fun, relaxing, and exciting vacation plans, not engaging in humdrum, trivial activities. Again, this line supports the irony of the title: In most cases, a person would not wish his wife to experience the boredom he is experiencing, unless he wishes her ill in some way.

Line thirteen reveals the speaker’s apparent animosity toward his wife, when he “phone-boothed” his “old flame” (12). In this case, “old” means dating from the remote past and “flame” means sweetheart. An “old flame” means an old girlfriend, according to the context of the poem. Also, “phone booth” used as a verb is not a real word, but the definitions of “phone” and “booth” are an instrument for reproducing sound at a distance and a small enclosure affording privacy for one person at a time, respectively. When the speaker says he is “phone-boothed,” he means that he was placing a telephone call from a phone booth. He may have been using a phone-booth because of the rainy weather, but it also means that he did not have a landline phone available to him. The fact that the speaker used a phone booth invokes the impression that his decision to call his ex-girlfriend was spontaneous, possibly because of sudden loneliness and hostile feelings towards his wife. This supports the speaker’s thoughts behind the title of the poem. Even though he is having an unpleasant time on his trip, he wishes his wife was there to experience the same feelings of loneliness and boredom because of his bitterness towards her. Thus, even though the title of the poem is “Wish You Were Here,” the speaker only wishes his wife were there to suffer the monotony and dreariness of the failed vacation.

In conclusion, the denotation and connotation of words used throughout the poem contribute to the title’s meaning. The irony in “Wish You Were Here” is evident in the way the speaker describes his vacation, from the phone call to his ex-girlfriend to the constant rain. Under normal circumstances, one would be grateful that his wife is not around to experience unpleasant feelings, but the speaker’s resentment of his wife strengthens the meaning behind the title’s irony.

Works Cited

R., Thomas, and Greg Johnson Arp. Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense. Ninth edition. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2006.

